

TRAGEDY AND ASSIMILATION: RECIPROCITY BETWEEN SURFACE AND SUBJECT

ABSTRACT

Here we unveil a tragic triptych of three Australian women painfully painted onto the walls of interior surfaces. The woman at the centre of the triptych is Florence Broadhurst whose tragic death still remains a mystery. To the right is Australian skin illustrator Emma Hack who recreates Broadhurst's wallpapers, mimicking their colourful patterns onto live models. Hack perfectly assimilates the models' body into the wallpaper, camouflaging bodies except for small hints at something more in the foreground. In the process of Hack's images, the models become statues, standing painfully still holding their breath for minutes at a time. The third woman, to the left of the triptych, is the fictional character Candy from the 2006 Australian film *Candy*. Candy's traumatic struggle with addiction ends with her conveying her pain in a poem she writes on the walls of her home; culminating her tragic story into a disturbed domestic wall surface. This research tries to understand this relationship with the surface through tragedy as a reciprocal agreement between surface and subject and not a permanent transference between one state and another. What the surface provides in times of personal struggle and turmoil is a method for us to come to terms with out material existence.

INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Lavin's book 'Kissing Architecture'¹ builds the case for a 'superarchitecture' that engages in a reciprocal relationship between its surface and its subjects. Lavin illustrates this relationship of a kissing architecture through comments made by video installation artist Pipilotti Rist's description of her 2008 work titled 'Pour Your Body Out' at MoMA, New York. Rist suggests that the basic provocation of her digital installation, projected onto the walls of the Taniguchi's voluminous MoMA foyer, is not to dominate the architecture, but to 'melt into it, as if to kiss the architecture.'² Rist goes on to say that as the title suggests, the work is a physical engagement between the body and the surface of the art gallery; its purpose is to physically draw people into the space and not deliver the work through the channels of mass communication. As MoMA curator Klaus Biesenbach explains Rist's work is one that you have to experience through physical contact with the surfaces of MoMA's foyer, touching cushions, the floor, walls and the light of the projections onto the skin, it is a physically immersive experience. An experience that the visitor may become lost in, Biesenbach portrays the installation as something, 'you could be lying on the floor and losing yourself time wise and space wise.'³



Image captured from video footage of Pipilotti Rist's installation, 'Pour Your Heart Out.' 2008, MoMA

To 'lose oneself' in the surface of the interior is a paradoxical concept. For Rist and Biesenbech it is a celebration of freedom, liberation from the banalities of the everyday and the socially constructed expectations of identity. On the other hand, to lose oneself calls for an occasion of lament for the loss of self, especially in the case of transference of identity from subject to surface. Assimilation of the female body with the surface of interior walls, especially wallpaper, has been widely discussed through various readings of Charlotte Perkins Gillman's late 19th century short story, 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'⁴ This paper shifts the study of body assimilating with the surface of the interior by defining assimilation as a reciprocal process of both a taking and a receiving of identity between subject and surface. To assimilate involves both adopting some aspect of identity while at the same time letting go of other elements. For example in cultural assimilation, a person may absorb a new culture but this might also require the loss of some aspect of their ethnicity, such as language or dress.⁵ Through this lens, this paper analyses this reflexive relationship between surface and subject in two sections. The first section investigates Florence Broadhurst and the fictional character Candy, from the Australian film of the same name, as two case studies of Australian women lost and assimilated into the surface of the interior. The second section looks at the work of Australian body illustrator Emma Hack and her simulated assimilation of the body into surface.



Candy and Dan in the opening scene of 'Candy' in the Gravitron.

In the opening scene of Australian film 'Candy' two lovers, Dan and Candy, enter an open top 'Gravitron' amusement ride.⁶ From a platform above their fatherly friend, Casper overlooks as the Gravitron begins to spin and the centrifugal forces created by this movement push Dan and Candy into the padded surfaces of the ride's walls. Perhaps the film's director was using the ride to symbolise the two characters spiralling or spinning out of control but more so, there is a sense of joy and liberation between Candy and Dan as the two are gently forced onto the wall's surface. As their bodies are feed of the corporeal weight of gravity and forced into the walls of the ride - the soft and flesh like surface of the Gravitron's padded interior absorbing Candy and Dan's skin and clothing – a fluid and dynamic assimilation between bodies and surface. This relationship with wall surfaces intensifies in the climatic scene of the film, which will be discussed further on in the paper. While Candy and Dan are fictional characters, Florence Broadhurst also performed a number of fictional characters throughout her life. From Bobby Broadhurst to Madame Pellier and her final act as Florence Broadhurst, famous wall paper and print designer. Both Candy and Florence share a number of commonalities including that they were both artists. A review of a Florence Broadhurst exhibition in the Sydney Morning Herald read that:

*'She paints, that her eye, indeed, only devours surface beauties, skin deep at best, without realising the structure beneath.....'*⁷

THE STRUCTURE BENEATH

Biographical research into Florence Broadhurst generates more questions than it manages to answer. Between Siobahn O'Brien's book, 'A Life by Design: the art and lives of Florence Broadhurst,'⁸ Helen O'Neil's book, 'Florence Broadhurst: her secret and extraordinary lives,'⁹ and Gillian Armstrong's documentary film 'Unfolding Florence: the many lives of Florence Broadhurst,'¹⁰ there are a number of discrepancies on significant aspects of her life. This is

in no way a reflection on O'Brien, O'Neil or Armstrong's research capabilities; rather it is a reflection of their subject, Florence Broadhurst, fabricator and curator to her own life story. There are three things that we can be sure of though, that she was born in 1899 in Mount Perry, Queensland despite her own denial of this truth (both the location of her origins and her age), that she commanded a successful wallpaper and printing firm and she was brutally murdered in her Paddington wallpaper studio in 1977. Her murder remains an unsolved mystery, almost complementing the confused series of invented tales that shroud Broadhurst's life. The discrepancies in Broadhurst's biographies range from whether or not she was married to long-term companion Leonard Lloyd Lewis; how long she spent in France and whether she ever received professional tutelage in painting and drawing; how long she spent working in the Mt Perry pub and where and for how long she spent time in hospital recovering from injuries that were the result of a drink driving car accident.

There were three main characters that Broadhurst played out in her life. Bobby Broadhurst, the Shanghai contralto singer and dancer with short dark bobbed hair and where she first learned to adopt a British lilt. Her second role was as Madame Pellier, a seemingly French fine clothing and home wares retailer to the upper classes in London before the Second World War. Her final act was as bright red haired Florence Broadhurst, Sydney based English artist and designer of fine handcrafted wall papers. Christine Schmidt attributed these re-iterations of her personality as 'a means of bypassing social conventions and surpassing her peers.'¹¹ For Broadhurst it was a deliberate and intentional act to manoeuvre herself in her desired direction. As Judith Butler writes identity is merely a performance of the social constructs we subscribe to¹², Broadhurst was simply conscious of this and manipulated this performance to her own benefit. While in London under the guise of Madame Pellier, Broadhurst wrote in her personal journal that the:

'Progress of civilisation is made possible only by vigorous sometimes even violent lying; that the social contract is nothing more or less than a vast conspiracy of human beings...lies are the mortar that bind the individual man into the social masonry...' ¹³

If the lies were the mortar in the wall, the structure beneath, were her wallpapers a device to cover her lies? Had her past truths manifested in her work, where in her last performance she was consumed with a diversion tactic of creating complex colourful surfaces? As Helen O'Neil writes that the difficulty in sorting between the fact and fiction in Broadhurst's life is inherent in the bedazzling lights emanating from her colourful existence even before creating her line of wallpapers when *'she began creating images so bold that few thought to question anything about them.'*¹⁴

Fernand Léger elucidated the potency of the coloured surface to camouflage and hide its subjects in his collaborations with Le Corbusier. In an essay Léger writes that white walls create '...an impalpability of air, of slick, brilliant new surfaces where nothing can be hidden any longer...'.¹⁵ Mark Wigley writes in his book 'White Walls, Designer Dresses' that to be faced with the white wall is to be lost.¹⁶ For Broadhurst then, the wallpapered surface would have given her an opportunity to both be found and to hide what she didn't want to be revealed. She could be discovered and yet concealed, it was a paradoxical relationship between the very public life she lead and all of the falsities she could bury beneath the

surface, in the structure beneath. The surface facilitates this reciprocal nature, as Wigley writes, *'the "flatness" of architecture is seen as "space restricting" while the modern painter's reduction of "corporeality to flatness" is seen to produce spatial relationship...'*¹⁷

Despite all of her misgivings Florence Broadhurst made a significant contribution to the Australian design scene. Undoubtedly her performances as Bobby and Madame Pellier contributed to the spectrum of images and colours in the Broadhurst range. In a time when interior designers were still perpetuating Australia's ship fed culture, Broadhurst established original Australian motifs that featured on walls in Paris, Bahrain, London and Singapore.¹⁸ In fact, a Broadhurst wallpaper features in the character Casper's house in the 2006 Australian film 'Candy' directed by Neil Armfield. The olive and green print of Broadhurst's '26. The Cranes' can be seen stretching across the expansive wall of Casper's living room. The wallpaper was brought in by the set decorator to symbolise the age and stature of the house and its sole inhabitant.¹⁹



'26. The Cranes.' Florence Broadhurst print featured on a wall in Casper's house in the film *Candy*.

THE WRITING'S ON THE WALL – CANDY

As Candy and Dan move in and out of a series of houses throughout their relationship's demise driven by heroin addiction and tragic events, Casper's house serves as a constant base, the neutralizing ingredient to their insanity. Armfield communicates Casper's house of refuge through not only through the drug related events that occur in it, but the visual language that it speaks. Casper's house executes a story of his possible past, conjuring images of a young gay man that ran off to acting school to live with his Grandmother in Sydney, eventually becoming his inheritance. The decrepitating grandeur home is highly ornamented with photos of a young Casper, paintings and most characteristically the Florence Broadhurst wallpaper. The interior surface of the house holds value to time in which Casper has become a part of its ornamentation. The correlation of the ornamentation to Casper promotes Candy and Dan's comfort in what surrounds them. Progression through

the interior environments communicated movement in time parallel to the gradual digression of Candy's life. A key characteristic to the environments present as Candy's life is gradually degenerating is minimalistic, sparse surfaces.



Candy's initial writing on the wall.

The climatic point of Candy's unstable mental condition occurs after yet another failed attempt to move house and start new again. The last house that Candy and Dan occupy together is situated in rural New South Wales, the house is characterized by its dishevelled and unkempt state. At this stage of the film Candy begins to blame Dan for her life's circumstances becoming mentally and verbally aggressive towards Dan. At the plight of her anger towards Dan and unstable mental condition, once left alone she approaches her interior surface. Dan wakes up one morning to Candy texturizing the cream walls of their bedroom with vibrant red lipstick. The lipstick in which she stains her wall also stain her face and her clothes, making herself become just as much a part of the walls as her words. The shot captures this as Candy's hands grip into the walls and her head leans into its surface of temperamental statements. Once Dan leaves the room in frustration with Candy's actions, Candy sits at her duchess and sternly looks at her reflection. The shot zooms in on Candy and her fragile connection with her reflection as she smears lipstick over her image in the surface. The strong metaphoric gestures in this shot encounter Candy as becoming surface, a visible representation of what lies below her pure surface. Sylvia Lavin's words encapsulate this extreme surface condition; *"From the face that mirrors the soul, to the magic writing tablet that reveals subconscious drives, the surface, any surface, all surfaces, have been*

considered worthy of attention insofar as they are the top layer, the outermost skin, the merely visible envelope of more particularized and specific under and inner depths.”²⁰



Candy becoming Surface

In the climatic scene in the house, Dan returns home to find the writing on the wall. Candy is absent and her physical presence has become the surface of the walls, as Dan stands awestruck reading the poem chaotically sprawling across the surfaces of the house. An excerpt from the poem reads:

“Danny the daredevil. Candy went missing... A vase of flowers by the bed. My bare blue knees at dawn. These ruffled sheets and you are gone and I am going too”²¹

The wide span cinematic shot in this scene suggests that Candy is not present through a bodily entity although she is present amongst the surface: we are left in belief that she is present in space, she has transformed into the wall's surface. Dan begins to clean some of the writing off the wall until he resigns in despair, he pins a message written on the back of one of Candy's paintings to the wall, as though communicating to her through the wall's surface and leaves for Casper's house.



The Writing on the Wall

It is at Casper's house that Dan receives the news that Candy has experienced a 'nervous breakdown' and has been taken to a hospital. Dan goes to visit Candy and in this scene there is different, visible, assimilation between Candy and the surface through the close up shot. The shot focuses on Candy's pale face and white hair that blend in to the white walls and translucent curtains behind her. This assimilation between subject and object through the 'close up' is explicated in Simone Brott's paper, 'Close Encounter, Withdrawn Effect.'²² Brott draws on a reading of Deleuze to describe this effect of the architectural surface becoming an 'entity'. Examining three films, *Through a Glass Darkly*, *Repulsion*, and *Barton Fink* Brott writes that, 'the close-up is not primarily scopic but a bodily bringing close, a visceral merging of subject and object.'²³ This is a device we see clearly in use throughout Candy's downfall; this is also a device visible in Australian body illustration artist, Emma Hack's work.



Candy in the hospital



Body Illustrator, Emma Hack painting a model into a Florence Broadhurst wallpaper.

SOMEBODY THAT I USED TO KNOW

Inspired by supermodel and pioneer of body painting, Verushka who painted herself into rustic walls, Emma Hack went in search for a new medium in which to blend the female body into the surfaces of walls.²⁴ Initially Hack's work was concerned with altering the outline of the female figure through camouflaging sections of the body by painting them into the surface of a wall.²⁵ In 2005, after finding a Broadhurst wallpaper in an Adelaide homewares store, she began working with Florence Broadhurst wallpapers as the background to her works. For Hack, Broadhurst's wallpapers had a special quality that would contribute to her work, she felt that, 'every time I look at the wallpaper I see there is a character in there.'²⁶ Hack's work exemplifies a reciprocal relationship between wall surface and subject. Broadhurst's wallpapers, as discussed earlier in this paper, bring some of her own identity to the work and Hack's painting of the female body brings a new life to Broadhurst's wallpapers. David Lennie of Signature Prints – the owners of the Broadhurst range of wallpapers – describes Emma's work as a 'joint venture' and something that Florence Broadhurst would have loved.²⁷ Broadhurst and Hack both also chose to work in traditional applications of their crafts, with Broadhurst maintaining the processes of hand printing wallpapers in a time when machine produced wallpapers were filling the market, and Hack hand painting the designs onto the models' bodies, refusing to use projection or post production editing to create 'flat images.'²⁸ This three dimensionality to the work draws the viewer into the image to decipher the borders between subject and object, drawing the voyeur into the architectural close up – a close encounter with the surface.

This close up was utilised by Hack when in 2010 she was commissioned to work on a film clip for a collaboration between Australian musician Gotye and New Zealand singer Kimbra.²⁹ The film clip involves the musicians being painted into and out of a wall's surface through a series of close up shots in a stop animation. The idea for the film clip arises from the song's title, 'Somebody That I Used to Know,' a song about a couple breaking up and depicts the artists blending, but not disappearing into the wall's surface, creating a sense of a shadowing of their identities.³⁰ This film clip is of particular interest because it is a male body that is painted into the surface and the female body is painted out of the surface, as though liberated from the wall. The assimilation of the male body with surface is also pointed out in Simone Brott's analysis of the film *Barton Fink*, where the actor John Turturro has a close encounter with the wallpaper in his room.³¹ This is where this study makes a departure from existing literature on the body and the wall's surface developed through analysis of 'The Yellow Wallpaper.' Rather than the subject being trapped or captivated by the surface, it is a reciprocal relationship between surface and subject and that in the process of being lost or losing oneself in the surface, the subject may come to terms with his or her material existence – it is a reflexive relationship through a close encounter with the surface.



Australian artist Gotye painted into the surface of the wall.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly the three narratives in this paper draw a parallel with 'The Yellow Wallpaper' in the tragic nature of their ends. Florence Broadhurst's life ended with her brutal murder, Candy suffered a nervous breakdown and Gotye and Kimbra's song is about the break down of a relationship. Lavin elaborates on this reflexive relationship between architecture and tragedy through the kiss in writing:

'Kissing is also a gentle way to say goodbye to an old architectural drama in which architecture is inevitably cast as a tragic figure, sometimes victim sometimes villain but always closer to failure than to success'.³²

Rist's title, 'Pour Your Body Out,' for her 2008 installation is a very acute description of what her work is asking the viewer to do. It could have been titled, 'Come to the Art Gallery,' but the work asks for much more than this, it asks for a fluid relationship fluctuating between subject and surface, not for a fixed state of one or the other. It is through the close encounter with the surface that we might come to terms with our material existence, by moving between a state of becoming surface and becoming subject.

NOTES

- ¹ Sylvia Lavin. 2011. *Kissing Architecture*. Princeton University Press, United Kingdom
- ² Interview with Pipilotto Rist: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89vgdELbVyQ>. Accessed February 26th
- ³ Interview with Klaus Biesenbach: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IL3NJdxfrAA&feature=relmfu>. Accessed February 26th
- ⁴ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. 2000. 'The Madwoman in The Attic: The woman writer and 19th century literary imagination.' Yale University Press, New York
- ⁵ Nikos Papastergiadis. 2000. 'The Turbulence of Migration.' Blackwell Publishers, United Kingdom
- ⁶ Davis, L. (Writer), Armfield, A. (Director), Mackie, A (Producer). (2006), *Candy* [DVD]. Sydney, NSW: New South Wales Film and Television Office
- ⁷ Siobahn O'Brien. 2004. 'A life by design [electronic resource] : the art and lives of Florence Broadhurst' Allen and Unwin, Australia
- ⁸ Siobahn O'Brien. 2004. 'A life by design [electronic resource] : the art and lives of Florence Broadhurst' Allen and Unwin, Australia
- ⁹ Helen O'Neil. 2006. 'Florence Broadhurst : her secret & extraordinary lives.' Hardy Grant Books, Australia
- ¹⁰ Gillan Armstrong. 2010. *Unfolding Florence* [videorecording] : the many lives of Florence Broadhurst. Icon Film Distribution, Australia
- ¹¹ Christine Schmidt. 2009. "Undressing Kellerman, Uncovering Broadhurst : the modern woman and "un-Australia". *Fashion Theory : The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, 13(4), pp. 481-498.
- ¹² Judith Butler. 2010. "Gender Trouble." Routledge, United Kingdom
- ¹³ Siobahn O'Brien. 2004. 'A life by design [electronic resource] : the art and lives of Florence Broadhurst' Allen and Unwin, Australia
- ¹⁴ Helen O'Neil. 2006. 'Florence Broadhurst : her secret & extraordinary lives.' Hardy Grant Books, Australia (p.6)
- ¹⁵ Mark Wigley. 1995. "White Walls, Designer Dresses." MIT Press, United Kingdom.
- ¹⁶ Mark Wigley. 1995. "White Walls, Designer Dresses." MIT Press, United Kingdom.
- ¹⁷ Mark Wigley. 1995. "White Walls, Designer Dresses." MIT Press, United Kingdom.
- ¹⁸ Siobahn O'Brien. 2004. 'A life by design [electronic resource] : the art and lives of Florence Broadhurst' Allen and Unwin, Australia
- ¹⁹ At the Movie's: Candy Interview. (24/5/2006) <http://www.abc.net.au/atthemovies/txt/s1630823.htm>. Accessed January 28, 2012.
- ²⁰ Sylvia Lavin. 2011. *Kissing Architecture*. Princeton University Press, United Kingdom
- ²¹ Davis, L. (Writer), Armfield, A. (Director), Mackie, A (Producer). (2006), *Candy* [DVD]. Sydney, NSW: New South Wales Film and Television Office
- ²² Simone Brott. 2008. Close encounter, withdrawn effects. *Journal of Architectural Education*, 61(4), pp. 6-16.

²³ Simone Brott. 2008. Close encounter, withdrawn effects. *Journal of Architectural Education*, 61(4), pp. 6-16.

²⁴ Interview with artist, Emma Hack <http://emmahackartist.com/documentaries.php>. Accessed February 3rd

²⁵ Interview with artist, Emma Hack <http://emmahackartist.com/documentaries.php>. Accessed February 3rd

²⁶ Interview with artist, Emma Hack <http://emmahackartist.com/documentaries.php>. Accessed February 3rd

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²⁸ Interview with artist, Emma Hack <http://emmahackartist.com/documentaries.php>. Accessed February 3rd

²⁹ Interview with artist, Emma Hack <http://emmahackartist.com/documentaries.php>. Accessed February 3rd

³⁰ Gotye and Kimbra, 'Somebody That I Used to Know.' Film clip. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UVNT4wvIGY> Accessed February 3rd.

³¹ Simone Brott. 2008. Close encounter, withdrawn effects. *Journal of Architectural Education*, 61(4), pp. 6-16.

³² Sylvia Lavin. 2011. *Kissing Architecture*. Princeton University Press, United Kingdom